DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 601 CG 024 419

AUTHOR Eldridge, Natalie S.
TITLE Counseling Dual Career Families: Heterosexual and Lesbian Perspectives.
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (100th, Washington, DC, August 14-18, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Counseling Objectives; *Counseling Techniques; *Dual Career Family; *Employed Women; *Lesbianism; *Mothers; Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS *Heterosexuality

ABSTRACT

Young women now have more freedom to shape themselves than young women anywhere or at any time in history. In counseling women for dual-career families the real and imagined difficulties must be addressed and their courage and self-conviction strengthened, not undermined. Especially crucial to the counseling process with these women is an understanding of traditional and emergent views of gender and gender roles that directly pertain to the dual-career family patterns. Gender extends beyond the individual and operates in the structures of society as well as in the dynamics of work and family relationships. Gender-related internal factors such as assumptions of female dependency and nurturance and male superiority and privilege, and external factors such as homophobia, sexual discrimination, and sexual harassment influence the explicit and implicit choices made by women who enter into dual-career relationships. Gender processes are influential in women's career development irrespective of an individual woman's sexual orientation. Yet these perspectives necessarily differ for lesbian and heterosexual women in dual-career families because of the structural differences associated with the gender of their respective partners. Those counselors who conduct career counseling for women wanting careers and family life are engaging in an exciting and complex process that, done well, can enhance the lives of the women and men they counsel as well as their own lives as individuals and as members of a changing society. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

COUNSELING DUAL CAREER FAMILIES: HETEROSEXUAL AND LESBIAN PERSPECTIVES

Natalie S. Eldridge
Boston University

Presentation for Symposium on
Contemporary Developments in Career Counseling for Women
Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association
1992 - Washington, DC

ED 348401

My presentation today is based on the chapter entitled "Gender and Dual-Career Families: Implications and Applications for the Career Counseling of Women," written by Lucia Gilbert, Marybeth Hallett, and myself. In this chapter, we take a gender perspective in understanding the realities for women in dual-career relationships. In addition, we attempt to update the literature in this area by including women in both lesbian and heterosexual dual-career families. I invite you to consider with me today some of the thoughts we had about the similiarities and differences of these two types of relationships for women, and how counseling might guide women in preparing for and managing the realities of each.

The term "dual-career family" was first used in 1969 by the Rapoports to describe what they considered an unusual and revolutionary type of dual-wage heterosexual family that emerged as the result of complex social changes. In these families, the woman and man both pursued a lifelong career, relatively uninterrupted, and also established and developed a family life that often included children. What was revolutionary to the Rapoports was the dual-

CG024419

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Natalie S Eldridge
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

career families' apparent inconsistency with traditional notions of gender. These relationships seemed to assume an economic equality between partners, a compatibility of occupational and family systems, and a presumed expansion of the spouse's self-concepts as men and women which allowed for the establishment of a relationship characterized by role-sharing, mutuality, and by an interdependency free of the constraints of gender.

Not all dual-career families are heterosexual, however. The integrating and sharing of occupational and family roles, which is an "emerging" pattern for women in heterosexual dual-career relations, is normative among lesbian dual-career families. Much of the interest and excitement about dual-career family patterns in the literature center around changes in the power relations between contemporary women and men. The situation is obviously different for lesbian dual-career relationships, which harbor neither the power dynamics implicit in heterosexual relationships nor the norms and roles of marriage as an institution. By identifying as lesbians, women generally accept a life-long responsibility to support themselves and their children. Both this economic reality, and women's socialization to value egalitarian relations, foster role-sharing relationships in lesbian couples.

Women today have more opportunities for career placement and advancement then ever before in our history and many heterosexual women want and push for the "revolutionary" two-career family with men envisioned by the Rapoports (Ferre, 1990; Guelzow, Bird, & Koball, 1991). Research indicates that approximately one-third of heterosexual dual-career families do

establish what they and objective others would consider an egalitarian relationship; in contrast, most of the lesbian relationships would be considered egalitarian (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Gilbert, in press).

Factors Influencing Women's Choices

Most women planning careers assume they will be in long-term romantic relationships (Tittle, 1981). These women not only need to understand factors that can help or hinder their achieving the kind of dual-career relationship they envision but they also need to be prepared for dealing with the likely obstacles and day-to-day realities. Thus, those individuals counseling women must address variables that interact with women's career development and be aware of how these factors may have powerful crossover effects in dual-career relationships. Furthermore, counselors must be aware how these effects differ for women involved in lesbian families and those in heterosexual families.

The variables that influence women's advancement in careers and their ability to integrate occupational and family roles can be very roughly divided into two categories: internal sociopsychological factors, and external structural factors. Of course, this division is rather artificial, as much of our internal sociopsychological world is influenced by and acted out in our external structural environments, and vice versa.

Internal Sociopsychological Factors

Two pervasive internal psychological factors that continue to influence the career development of women with regard to dual-

career families are the assumption of female dependency, and the assumption of male superiority and priviledge.

There is a long history of women having little authority and depending on others for their sense of self. There is also a long history of assumed male superiority and entitlement. One consequence of these realities is women's investment in the importance of relationships and looking to relationships as a way to feel important or worthwhile (Heilbrun, 1988; Lerner, 1983; Westkott, 1986). Still today many women are socialized to believe that being partnered or married is a first priority in life and that achieving financial independence and career recognition are secondary to their roles as caregivers and partners. For instance the belief that women's lives are given meaning through their attachment to men, and that men take care of women in return, remains a powerful metaphor in women's lives. Being without a man supposedly means that the woman is undesirable and unlovable, a belief which can bring about feelings of shame and inadequacy, despite a woman's career accomplishments.

The relationship between female dependency, male entitlement and women's career development is multi-layered and is played out in different ways for heterosexual and lesbian women. Lesbians typically go through a process of loss, grieving, and letting go of many myths about women's place and role in society as they develop a positive lesbian identity. This will affect a woman's career development according to where she is in the coming out process when she makes certain career decisions. Heterosexual women often feel they have to chose between a career and marriage, or that they

must accommodate to a husband. If the male partner is unwilling to engage in an egalitarian relationship, she may view the choice of one between equality and marriage. Indeed the literature indicates that many women find themselves doing more than their share and resenting it, and at the same time feeling reluctant to challenge male dominance and privilege because of the fear of losing the relationship or of feeling less competent and assured than the male partner (Gilbert, 1988). In order to maintain the dual-career family, these women may underfunction professionally or subordinate their career desires to their partner's plans and aspirations (Lerner, 1983). Lesbians may also accommodate to their partners, or fear challenging their partners, but this situation lacks the powerful reinforcement of heterosexual gender dynamics.

Rarely does a man wonder about the consequences of being too competent. In contrast, this if often a concern for young women thinking ahead to relationships, particularly heterosexual relationships. It is not unusual for women to struggle with the negative reactions they receive for being too competent. Being competent and professionally ambitious is still inconsistent with traditional views of what makes a woman desirable and worthwhile (to men). The notion of women making their own choices, separate from the needs of others, is inconsistent with societal and women's self-views of women. The role conflict experienced by women in dual-career relationships can be heightened by internalized views that women are primarily nurturers and that being ambitious is tantamount to greed and selfishness. This will be a factor for women in both lesbian and heterosexual families, but again, the added

stimulus of male entitlement will be present for the lesbians only on their jobs, but not in their homes. Men learn to see themselves as special and superior and they are conditioned to assume that their needs and desires come before the needs and desires of women. Clearly, these beliefs do not bode well for successful, equitable relationships between women and men, for women's career development, nor for the development of family-friendly policies for both sexes. Feelings of entitlement may surface regarding how to perform domestic or parenting roles, whose career is primary, or who should make the larger salary. Male entitlement issues will be a struggle for men and women as they try to develop careers in a society that remains considerably sexist and form relationships that have little historical precedence. Similarly, lesbians are forming relationships that have little visible historical precedence, and struggling with self-efficacy and empowerment in a society that remains sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic.

External Structural Factors

Any discussion of the factors that influence women's career development has to include the persistent societal beliefs and attitudes about women and work, and the kinds of subtle and overt discrimination experienced by employed women. It is essential to understand that women develop a sense of their "possible selves" with regard to work and family in the context of society's views about women and the structural constraints put on women's work (Gilbert & Dancer, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Exposure to these beliefs and limitations begins at birth. Both women and men internalize stereotypic notions about women' s and men's

achievement and relationships, views that are played out as individuals come together in dual-career partnerships.

Two examples of societal beliefs or myths which may be affecting women career clients are:

Women can not successfully combine domestic and waged labor. Many people still believe, for instance, that the involvement of women in waged labor is harmful to the family system.

Achievement is not feminine. In the past, many women reconciled their achievement desires and this belief by choosing "feminine" occupations, by not attempting to advance in their careers, or by adopting stereotypic roles in the work place, such as "nurturer" or "sex object". It is important to address these beliefs when counseling women for dual-career relationships, as these women themselves may have internalized this point of view and unconsciously be acting on it.

The other source of external barriers for women's career development is discrimination. Even with the existence of federal laws that prohibit sexual discrimination, women are still largely segregated into low-income, low-status positions, not promoted at near the rate that men are, and paid only a percentage of what men in comparable positions are paid. In the interest of time, I will simply mention some of the types of discrimination which we discuss more fully in the book chapter, then look at how these might impact women's dual-career relationships. Taste discrimination describes employers who simply prefer not to have women around, either due to dislike of women, or to the threat they may compete with men for jobs. Statistical discrimination describes employers who believe, or

claim to believe, that it is probable they will get more consistent work from men: men are a better long-term investment than women. Other forms of discrimination in the workplace are differential evaluations and rewards based on gender, a lack of role models and mentors for professional women, and of course, lets not forget sexual harrassment. Many men are not personally familiar with these forms of discrimination. Some men may have trouble understanding the difficulties their wives report about their work environment. On the other hand, male partners may become educated about sexual harrassment, for instance, and become a source of support for their spouse. A supportive partner may make it easier for women to leave their work environment, or to file a sexual harassment case. However, in lesbian couples, where both partners may have to deal with sexual harassment, it may be harder for partners to confront the harassment dynamics due to internal or external homophobia, and harder for them to leave the work environment because of economics. Lesbians, like women in general, earn less than men on average, but the impact for them is reflected not in differences between partners' incomes, but in lower joint earnings as a couple (Schneider, 1986).

Just as racism is another external variable for women of color, heterosexism is added to all the other forms of discrimination when we discuss women in dual-career relationships with other women. Homophobia is the irrational fear, intolerance, and in its most severe form, hatred of people who are gay or lesbian (Pharr, 1988). This type of prejudice leads to persistent beliefs in negative stereotypes toward gays and lesbians, and supports discriminating actions

against these groups in areas such as jobs, housing, and child custody.

When homophobia is combined with cultural and institutional power, the result is heterosexism: a belief in the inherent superiority of heterosexuality and its right to dominance. This is analogous to sexist and racist attitudes being combined with the cultural and institutional power to enforce these attitudes, resulting in sexism and racism. As an external, structural factor, then, heterosexism can have a powerful influence on a woman's choice to envision, enter, or stay in a dual-career relationship with another woman. Being "out" on the job can have devastating repercussions to the woman's career advancement or even to her rights to remain employed. It can also threaten her child custody rights if she is divorced, or her ability to adopt children. There are no institutional benefits to "coming out," as few employers extend benefits to an "unmarried" partner or to biological children of that partner. Choosing to "be discreet," however, can have great personal costs in terms of feeling isolated, compartmentalized, and unaffirmed.

All the discriminatory practices I have mentioned can bring anger, discontentment, despair and stress to a woman, and affect how she manages her career and her relationship as part of a dual-career couple. Learning to recognize forms of discrimination and becoming informed about what to do should a woman or her partner become a target represent crucial components of effective career counseling.

Lesbians and heterosexual women are indistinquishable on many individual characteristics in regard to their relationships. For instance, correlates of relationship satisfaction found in studies of

lesbian relationships are quite similar to those of women in dual-career heterosexual relationships (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Schneider, 1986). These include a strong valuing of shared decision-making, intimacy in the relationship, equality of power, equality of involvement in the relationship, dyadic attachment and a similarity of attitudes and backgrounds. In other words, women want these things in their relationships whether they are envisioning a relationship with a man or a woman.

The differences we find for lesbians and heterosexual women are not in individual differences between these two groups of women, but in the differences between the two types of partnerships. In the case of power, for instance, women place a higher value on equality of power in their relationships than do men, although men also express a value in equality. In a study of college students (Peplau, 1979), both women (95%) and men (87%) indicated that heterosexual dating partners should have equal say in their relationships. However, only 49% of the women and 42% of the men reported equal power in their current relationships. When power was unequal, it was usually the male that had greater power. In a study comparing lesbian, gay male, heterosexual cohabitating, and married couples, the amount of money a person earned established the relative power in the couple relationship in every group except the lesbian couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). The authors attributed this finding to gender socialization, suggesting that it is the presence of male socialization in relationships that leads to the equating of money and power. In taking on "the good provider role," men are socialized to feel entitled to exercise control if they have

proved their worth by being financially successful (Bernard, 1981). This example of power dynamics in relationships illustrates both the similarity of heterosexual and lesbian women, and the distinct contextual difference in the relationships these women experience. An applied outcome is that combining work and family within the relationship is much less of a problem for lesbian couples than for heterosexual couples, whereas the heterosexist bias in employers' policies typically makes combining work and family harder for lesbian families than for heterosexual families.

Summary

Young women now have more freedom to shape themselves than young women anywhere or at any time in history. That freedom at times is a lonely and difficult burden, particularly when tradition dampens spirits and limits opportunities. In counseling women for dual-career families the real and imagined difficulties must be addressed and their courage and self-conviction strengthen, not undermined.

Especially crucial to the counseling process with these women is an understanding of traditional and emergent views of gender and gender roles that directly pertain to the dual-career family patterns. Gender extends beyond the individual and operates in the structures of society as well as in the dynamics of work and family relationships. Gender-related internal factors such as assumptions of female dependency and nurturance and male superiority and privilege, and external factors such as homophobia, sexual discrimination, and sexual harassment influence the explicit and

implicit choices made by women who enter into dual-career relationships.

Gender processes are influential in women's career development irrespective of an individual woman's sexual orientation. Yet these perspectives necessarily differ for lesbian and heterosexual women in dual-career families because of the structural differences associated with the gender of their respective partners. The meaning of role-sharing or establishing an egalitarian relationship, for example, differs dramatically when we move from a relationship centered around gender differences to one centered around gender sameness.

Dual-career family patterns based not only on egalitarian role relations with a partner but also on the compatability of occupational and family systems are still emerging in our society. Those doing career counseling for women wanting careers and family life are engaging in an exciting and complex process that, done will, can enhance the lives of the women and men they counsel as well as their own lives as individuals and as members of a changing society.

REFERENCES

Bernard, J. (1974). The future of motherhood. New York: Dial Press.

Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1983). American couples. New York: William Morrow.

Eldridge, N. S., & Gilbert, L. A. (1990). Correlates of relationship satisfaction in lesbian couples. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 14, 43-62.

Ferree, M. M. (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52, 866-884.

Gilbert, L. A. (1988). Sharing it all: The rewards and struggles of two-career families. New York: Plenum.

Gilbert, L. A. (in press). Gender and counseling psychology: Current knowledge and directions for research and social action. In S. D. Brown and R. W. Lent (Eds.), Handbook of counseling psychology.

Gilbert, L. A., & Dancer, L. S. (1991). Dual-earner families in the United States and adolescent development. In S. Lewis, H. Hootsmans, & D. Izraeli, Crossnational perspectives on dual-earner families. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Gilbert, L. A., Hallett, M., & Eldridge, N. S. (in press). Gender and dual-career families: Implications and applications for the career counseling of women. In B. Walsh & S. Osipow (Eds.), Career counseling for women.

Guelzow, M. G., Bird, G. W., & Koball, E. H. (1991). An exploratory path analysis of the stress process for dual-career men and women. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53, 151-164.

Heilbrun, C. G. (1988). Writing a woman's life. New York: Ballentine Books.

Lerner, H. E. (1983). Female dependency in context: Some theoretical and technical considerations. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 53, 697-705.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). 'Possible selves.' American Psychologist, 41, 954-969.

Peplau, L. A. (1979). Power in dating relationships. In J. Freeman (Ed.), Women: A feminist perspective, 2nd Ed. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.

Pharr, S. (1988). Homophobia: A weapon of sexism. Little Rock, AR: Chardon.

Rapoport, R., & Rapoport, R. N. (1969). The dual-career family. Human Relations, 22, 3-30.

Schneider, M. S. (1986). The relationships of cohabiting lesbian and heterosexual couples: A comparison. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 10, 234-239.

Tittle, C. K. (1981). Careers and family: Sex roles and adolescent life plans. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Westkott, M. (1986). The feminist legacy of Karen Horney. New Haven: Yale University Press.